

Message Text

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ACTION ARA-20

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FM AMEMBASSY SANTO DOMINGO

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 1061

C O N F I D E N T I A L SANTO DOMINGO 3074

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PFOR, PINT, DR

SUBJECT: SANTO DOMINGO STRIKES

1. SUMMARY. CHRONIC WATER SHORTAGES, BLACKOUTS AND A DRASTIC ELECTRICITY RATE INCREASE AGAINST THE BACKGROUND OF CONTINUING INFLATION HAVE SPARKED WORK STOPPAGES IN SANTO DOMINGO'S POORER NEIGHBORHOODS DURING THE LAST TEN DAYS. LOOKING FOR AN EFFECTIVE MEANS TO COUNTER PRESIDENT BALAGUER'S ELECTORAL VICTORY, THE OPPOSITION HAS BEEN INSTRUMENTAL IN ORGANIZING AND SPREADING THE STOPPAGES, HOPING THAT THEY MIGHT BE TURNED INTO A NATIONAL-LEVEL DEMONSTRATION OF PROTEST WHICH WOULD COINCIDE WITH THE SANTIAGO ACCORD'S DECLARATION OF AUG 15 AND 16 (THE INAUGURATION) AS "DAYS OF NATIONAL SORROW." END OF SUMMARY.

2. BEGINNING JULY 16, THERE HAVE BEEN A SERIES OF BRIEF, SMALL STOPPAGES OR STRIKES IN THE NORTHERN SLUM DISTRICTS OF SANTO DOMINGO. THESE STRIKES CAUSED STORES TO CLOSE, TRAFFIC TO DECREASE AND A GENERAL SLOW-DOWN IN THE ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL ACTIVITY. ALTHOUGH THERE WERE A FEW ROCK THROWING INCIDENTS, THE SECURITY FORCES REACTED WITH UNUSUAL RESTRAINT AND THE STRIKES RECEIVED SCANT PUBLIC ATTENTION. THE STRIKES CONTINUED NEVERTHELESS. ON

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JULY 23, 19 SANTO DOMINGO NEIGHBORHOODS STOPPED WORK FOR

A 24-HOUR PERIOD TO DEMONSTRATE THEIR GROWING DISSATISFACTION WITH THE WORSENING WATER SHORTAGES, CHRONIC POWER BLACKOUTS AND GENERALLY INADEQUATE GOVERNMENT SERVICES, AND ESPECIALLY THEIR NON-ACCEPTANCE OF A DRAMATIC (100 PERCENT) INCREASE IN ELECTRICITY RATES.

3. PRESIDENT BALAGUER'S UNEXPECTED JULY 22 RESCISSION OF THE RATE INCREASES, ALTHOUGH LAUDED BY NEARLY EVERYONE, APPARENTLY HAD NOT BEEN SUFFICIENTLY RESPONSIVE TO END THE STRIKES; THE JULY 23 STOPPAGES NOT ONLY COVERED MUCH OF THE POORER AREAS OF SANTO DOMINGO, BUT ALSO EXTENDED TO THE PROVINCIAL CAPITALS OF SANTIAGO AND BANI. (THE PRESIDENT, USING A TACTIC WHICH HAD WORKED FOR HIM IN THE PAST, PASSED THE BLAME FOR THE RATE INCREASES TO THE STATE-OWNED CORPORACION DOMINICANA DE ELECTRICIDAD (CDE) WHICH, HE CLAIMED, HAD NOT RECEIVED HIS APPROVAL PRIOR TO DECLARING THE INCREASES. HE THEREFORE REFERRED THE MATTER FOR FURTHER STUDY. BY RESCINDING THE RATES AT THIS TIME AND PASSING THE BLAME FOR THEIR INTRODUCTION TO THE CDE, BALAGUER UNDOUBTEDLY WISHED TO MAKE HIMSELF APPEAR RESPONSIVE TO THE STRIKEERS DEMANDS AND THUS UNDERCUT THEIR EFFORTS.)

4. THE STRIKES APPEAR TO HAVE BEEN GENERATED BY LOCAL LEVEL PARTIDO REVOLUCIONARIO DOMINICANO (PRD) ACTIVISTS WITH SOME ASSISTANCE FROM ELEMENTS OF THE MOVIMIENTO POPULAR DOMINICANO (MPD) AND PERHAPS FROM OTHER EXTREME-LEFT GROUPS. THESE PRD AND MPD MILITANTS, BELOW THE LEVEL OF THE ZONE LEADERSHIP, HAVE BEEN RESPONSIBLE FOR GETTING OUT THE WORK IN THEIR NEIGHBORHOODS AND REPORTEDLY HAVE HAD LITTLE DIFFICULTY CONVINCING THE POOR AND THE SMALL LOCAL MERCHANTS (WHO STRONGLY OPPOSED THE ELECTRICITY RATE INCREASES AND RESENTED THE POWER FAILURES) THAT THE STOPPAGES WERE THE MOST EFFECTIVE MEANS TO EXPRESS THEIR DISSATISFACTION. WHEN THE STRIKES TOOK HOLD, THE PRD NATIONAL LEADERSHIP, WHICH HAD PREVIOUSLY GIVEN ONLY TACIT APPROVAL, APPARENTLY DECIDED THAT CONDITIONS WERE RIGHT TO ORGANIZE STRIKES ON A WIDER SCALE.

5. ON JULY 24, A GODR COUNTER-ACTION AGAINST THE STOP-
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PAGES WAS LAUNCHED IN THE FORM OF AN ORDER FROM THE DIRECTOR GENERAL OF TELECOMMUNICATIONS TO DOMINICAN RADIO AND TELEVISION STATIONS PROHIBITING THEM FROM BROADCASTING NEWS OF THE STRIKES. ALTHOUGH PRESIDENT BALAGUER, UNDER PRESSURE FROM THE RADIO AND PRESS ASSOCIATIONS, PROMISED TO REVIEW THE PROHIBITION, IT WAS STILL IN EFFECT JULY 25. THE GODR CONTINUED, HOWEVER, TO EXERCISE NO PHYSICAL REPRESSION OF THE STRIKERS. PERHAPS AS A REWARD FOR THAT

RESTRAINT, THE GOVERNMENT RECEIVED SOME VALUABLE SUPPORT FOR ITS ANTI-STRIKE POSITION FROM THE PRESTIGIOUS DAILY LISTIN DIARIO WHICH ON JULY 25 CARRIED A VERY STRONG EDITORIAL AGAINST THE STOPPAGES, CALLING THEIR DEMANDS UN-REALISTIC AND THEIR ORGANIZERS POLITICALLY MOTIVATED AND IRRESPONSIBLE.

6. COMMENT: THE STRIKES APPEAR TO BE THE OPPOSITION'S ANSWER TO THEIR GROWING SUSPICION THAT PRESIDENT BALAGUER WILL MAKE NO MAJOR CONCESSIONS TO THEM IN THE FORM OF GOVERNMENT POSITIONS AND INVOLVEMENT IN POLICY DECISIONS. THE STRIKES ALSO MAY BE THE OPPOSITION'S WAY OF TESTING ITS STRENGTH VIS-A-VIS THE GODR, WITH SOME COMMENTATORS SUGGESTING THAT IF SUFFICIENT POPULAR SUPPORT IS DEVELOPED, THE OPPOSITION JUST MAY TRY TO LAUNCH A GENERAL STRIKE. IN ADDITION, THE STOPPAGES WILL UNDOUBTEDLY SERVE THE OPPOSITION AS A LEAD-IN TO THEIR ANNOUNCED PLAN TO BOYCOTT THE PRESIDENT'S THIRD INAUGURAL BY PROCLAIMING AUGUST 15 AND 16 AS "DAYS OF NATIONAL SORROW" IN WHICH A "SILENT MARCH OF PASSIVE RESISTANCE" WOULD BE HELD, CITIZENS WOULD BE ENCOURAGED TO WEAR BLACK ARMBANDS, AND BUSINESSES WOULD CLOSE.

7. EVEN THOUGH THERE IS A REAL AND GROWING UNREST AMONG THE POORER AND LOWER MIDDLE CLASS CITIZENRY OF SANTO DOMINGO CAUSED BY UNEMPLOYMENT, INCREASING INFLATION AND THE SOMETIMES INEFFICIENT AND INADEQUATE GOVERNMENT SERVICES, IT SEEMS UNLIKELY THAT THIS DISSATISFACTION HAS REACHED A POINT WHERE IT IS A SERIOUS THREAT TO THE GODR; I.E., THERE IS NO INDICATION THAT THE MASSES ARE NOW WILLING TO TAKE TO THE STREETS. NONETHELESS, THE ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL CAUSES OF THE STRIKES REMAIN UN-RESOLVED, READILY AVAILABLE FOR OPPOSITION EXPLOITATION. CONFIDENTIAL

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